Bloodshed in Bayonne

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Since the publication of his *Reminiscences* in 1909 and the incorporation of the Rockefeller Foundation in 1913, that great "gift to the nation," the common opinion of John D. Rockefeller had begun its metamorphosis from the devil incarnate to grace-endowed benefactor, philanthropist and all-round great American. Though the vast number of ordinary people succumbed to the propaganda, most anti-capitalists were not fooled. In London, G. K Chesterton reviewed the memoir:

Quote:
Catholics cheat and bargain and hoard money; they do it stubbornly, sullenly, as they do any other wicked thing. Mr. Rockefeller does it vastly, magnificently, poetically, because in his religion it has often been counted an admirable thing. Avarice is a sin in Christians; it is an ideal in individualists. Millionaire worship is as much a mark of a Protestant country as Ancestor worship of China.

Rockefeller's undying conviction that God had blessed him with success and wealth conflicted with his ungodly treatment of his workers who endured scanty wages, dangerous conditions, miserable housing and persistent debt to the company store.

In the late Autumn of 1913 the Herculean effort to deodorize his reputation was embarrassed by a strike by coal miners at a Rockefeller investment in Colorado which led to the Ludlow Massacre. After months of denying family responsibility, John D. Junior reacted with an industrial relations policy at Rockefeller controlled companies that was highly praised as "enlightened" by every business journal in the land and the family reputation rebounded. Yet, a far more significant step was the hiring of Ivy Lee as public relations manager for the Rockefeller interests.

Standard Oil Workers Revolt

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On October 8, 1916, the Standard Oil workers went on strike as they had the year before. "The strike simply came out the air, with no organization beforehand, but only as the inevitable result of poor living, low wages and a revolt against a standard of living that ought no longer to be taken for granted in this country."1 Charles Wright, the editor of *The New York Call* was in Bayonne most likely with his new special features writer, Dorothy Day, and wrote:
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In the Standard Oil plants the men work under terrific temperatures and in conditions that defy description. Still cleaners work in a stench that is al but unbearable. Men don’t last long in those plants. That is why only the strongest of immigrant workers come to these places. But soon they find that the wages don’t buy enough food and clothes, don’t pay rent, don’t give the workers any chance at all for anything that goes to make up life. And they revolt. That is what these flare-ups are. They are revolts, not strikes.2

John Reed’s assessment was “These driven cattle, unable to speak English, unable even to communicate with each other, forced to the last desperate remedy by hopeless debt and slowly tightening starvation, went on strike.”3

Everything Under Control

Both John D’s (Senior and Junior) firmly denied any responsibility claiming

both had resigned from the board of Standard Oil, but this was standard procedure. Of John D., Sr. it is claimed, *he always stood at several removes from any mayhem. He was a master puppeteer, adroitly manipulating his marionettes, with the strings artfully concealed*.4

Being such an important part of Standard Oil's operations, the Bayonne city authorities had been on the Rockefeller payroll for thirty years. Reformers had repeatedly been elected to [i]clean the place up but just as repeatedly quickly named their price upon taking office.5

The current occupant of the mayor's office was one of these shameless reformers:

Quote:

The Mayor of Bayonne, Mr. Pierre Garven, is the Standard Oil attorney for Hudson County. When I questioned his impartiality during the strike, he told me how, during a former term as Mayor, he had increased the tax assessment against the Standard Oil Company's property by some $7,000,000. It was after this that the company engaged him as attorney, and now the officials of the Tax Department who make the appraisals of Bayonne property are Mayor Garven's political associates.6

There was always some Rockefeller beneficence to be expected by the public authorities on such occasions and the company came through. In December, the police retirement fund received a Christmas gift of $3,000 from Standard Oil.

A Friendly Press Covers For Rockefeller

The Robber Barons had awakened to the realities of the media. They found that endowing chairs of business and journalism contributed to a more favorable opinion of them. Rockefeller knew all these tricks and before long the respected members of the capitalist press were treated to Ivy Lee's carefully choreographed account of the events. Their reporters didn't bother crossing the Hudson River to see for themselves what was going on; they simply telephoned the Bayonne authorities who depicted a city overrun by bloodthirsty strikers, *mob rule, the entire police force practically under siege*, and a *reign of terror*.7

A Different Story Is Told

On the other hand, some friends of Labor such as John Reed, Mary Heaton Vorse, Dante Barton, Chester Wright and Dorothy Day, regarded Bayonne as a company-induced police riot. *The New York Call* asked *Why are the workers always regarded as the aggressors? Why are the employers never indicted for underpaying their workers*[? 8]

Dante Barton, a nationally respected pro-Labor reporter, was offended by the reports of the capitalist press:

Quote:

Newspaper stories of the Bayonne strike within the last day or two have tended to create the impression that the strikers have captured the city and are in full control of it, whereas the fact, as proved by investigation, is that this great group of industrious, hard-working and oppressed working people were simply being taunted by policemen and gunmen brought in by the Rockefellers.[9]

Corruption at the top, seeps down through the whole organism. The Bayonne authorities not only entirely misrepresented the events for the capitalist press but, fully in league with the Rockefeller interests who had no intention of negotiating in good faith, they also took matters into their own hands. Having sensed the strike coming for some days, the Bayonne police were *prepared* for it.

Police Inspector Daniel Cady immediately rushed ninety men to the strike zone, six being sharpshooters armed with rapid-fire rifles.[10]

Quote:

For the first time in an American industrial dispute, the police officials announced that their object was to break the strik[e11] *And from the first night,*

when a hundred officers, armed with riot guns and repeating rifles, marched down to the Hook to demonstrate the futility of striking to the workmen, the object of the Bayonne city authorities was to drive the strikers back to work in every way the police knew. The Standard Oil Company announced through Mr. George H. Hennessy, superintendent of the Bayonne plant, that it had absolute faith in the authorities of the city of Bayonne, and Henry Wilson, Bayonne's Director of Public Safety, justified this faith when he said on October 14: We've got this strike broken, and we'll keep it broken. If the men are wise, they will accept the chance I have gained for them. The chance referred to, be it noted, was that of going back to work under the hideous existence that had driven them to strike…

People were threatened in the streets by policemen point rifles at them, were driven indoors, were shot at when they looked out of the windows. Sophie Torach, a young bride of nineteen, with a two-months old baby, was shot to death while sitting in the open window – her brother being one of the most influential strikers.[12]

Eye Witnesses

Charles Wright, the editor of *The New York Call*, personally visited Bayonne in the early days of the strike, most likely accompanied by his special features writer, Dorothy Day. When it was all over he recalled:

Quote:

Government goes at them with guns. Government forgets that these revolts are a manifestation of a maladjustment in the social machinery. Government looks upon them brutally – and cynically.

Government looks upon these men as slaves who have no right to refuse to work. Government looks upon them as chattels.

So the police are set upon the strikers… The cops had guns in plenty. They had shotguns and rifles and deadly automatic revolvers, as well as plenty of hickory clubs. And the cops used these weapons to DELIBERATELY START TROUBLE. I saw them do it. This is not hearsay. I saw 280 of them, regulars, deputies and specials, armed to the teeth, start out for a "clean-up." They marched through the streets, firing right and left. Homes were broken into and searched. The strikers meeting hall was looted and wrecked – BY THIS POLICE! Volley after volley was fired into crowds of strikers and on-lookers, al of them peaceful. The tol of that one day's onslaught was two dead and about seventeen wounded. Not a policeman was hurt. Not one got a scratch. BUT THE WORKERS GOT THEIRS.13

Dante Barton walked the town during the strike and just missed witnessing the murder of Sophie Torach:

Quote:

The only unsafe portion of Constable Hook for me to visit was that portion in the actual possession of the police. Three minutes before I reached a street intersection a woman had been killed in a second story window near that crossing, and from half a dozen to a dozen persons wounded, some seriously by shot fired by the police and guards.14

Nor did John Reed see justification for the police violence:

Quote:

In spite of all that provocation, in spite of the wild stories of battles, riots and assaults which come out of Bayonne, I can find record of only three fights between strikers and police, all of them incited by the police. Two places were smashed up by the strikers; one the saloon of Samuel Greenberg, who harbored armed detectives and telephoned the police where to find certain strike-leaders, and the

other Cohen's clothing store, the rendezvous of the gunmen. But the police wrecked and demolished six saloons owned by striker sympathizers and smashed up twenty or more tenements in their search for armed weapons.15

The illegal searches of persons and homes for *concealed* weapons produced very little; Quote:

only about fifteen persons have been arrested for carrying concealed weapons, although all last night the town was patrolled and every passer by searched and scores of homes invaded in the hunt for concealed weapons.16

The wounded were initially taken to the local hospital but when word got out that the police were arresting all the wounded there, friends took their wounded comrades to more distant locations for care. For this reason, the estimate of wounded in the capitalist press, coming directly from the police, was grossly understated.

With the New York papers full of stories of mayhem, Mary Heaton Vorse found just the opposite: Quote:

After the accounts of riot and bloodshed, after the warnings one has received concerning the violent character of the strikers, it was very strange to go through the silent, desolate streets. Life, temporarily, seems to have stopped. There seems to be some strange and mournful holiday. And everywhere, wherever you go, you find the same atmosphere of fear and suspense.

The people are ready to scurry to their houses when the deputized police and the detectives with shotguns and rifles march imposingly past. They run to their houses, and there they hide. For men and women have been shot while standing in their windows…

The mournful little groups of huddled people seem glad to talk to you, especially women, and their talk is about one thing – and that is shooting…Wherever you go, in whatever group you find yourself, the story is repeated with a ghastly and unvarying monotony. One story is of a woman with a child in her arms who has been hit; in another street an old man has been hit; in another place yet, they'll tel how a neighbor dodged just in time to escape being struck, and they will point to a hole in the window. One sees many suggestive bullet holes as one walks up and down the strike district.17

Between 19th and 25th streets, and from Avenue E to the tip of Constable Hook, is the dwelling place of these people. They live packed in ramshackle tenements, many of them wooden, in three or four-room flats, for which they pay outrageous rents. Often a man, wife, six children and nine boarders will live in three rooms – the boarders working in three different shifts, one rising from his filthy pile of rags to go to work just when the other comes, worn out, from his shift. There are no sanitary arrangements whatever in most of these places, except a common shed in the back yard; water is procured from a nearby common pump.

John Reed

A Striker's Family
Boardman Robinson

All through the warm night there was the smell of rats. The smell of dead things, the smell of rotting garbage. If you have ever been in a town where there are stock yards, fertilizer factories, paper mills, you know the peculiar odors of our industrial system. They are not sweet.

I have smelled them in Bayonne, in Chicago, in Mobile, and they are the smell of death.

Dorothy Day, 1948

Dividing Up

The evangelists of capitalism deride socialism for dividing up society by setting one class against the other, but the argument of *dividing up* merely masked the real dividing up perpetuated by the free market for labor and the *divide and conquer* principle that continues its noxious effects even today. In his bold and insightful style, John Reed observed *dividing up* in Bayonne:

Quote:

There is a similarity in all these Rockefeller strikes, which springs from the similarity of Rockefeller industrialism everywhere. In Bayonne, as in Colorado three years ago, I find that the policy of the company has been to keep the great mass of laborers ignorant and disunited and every man's hand against them. Among the unskilled workmen, Americans and English-speaking men have been replaced by Polaks, Slovaks, Lithuanians, Russian Jews, Italians – and their racial and religious antipathies given full play. Most of them do not speak English at all, and of course the different nationalities cannot communicate with each other.

These hunkies are despised by the Americans, Irish, Germans, who compose the small proportion of well-paid skilled workmen – the white men, as they call themselves; no hunky can belong to a white organization. The skilled workers opposed the strike, and would have gone to work had they dared.

The townspeople speak of these dangerous foreigners, and treat them as if they were animals. Even the police have a personal antipathy toward the hunkies.

The reason for this universal dislike is a tribute to the diplomacy of the Standard Oil Company and the stupidity of the American working class. I talked with a German-American mechanic. 'Why have I no sympathy with these men?' he said. 'It is because they are scabs. You know it is the law that we must be paid time and a half for overtime work. Well, sometimes the foreman comes around and says: 'If you want to work overtime without extra pay, we'll stay open a couple of hours more; but if you want

time and a half we can't afford it, and must shut down.' Now, we won't work overtime for straight time

– but these damned hunkies, they say 'All right.' And that makes the eight hour day a joke.' He thought for a minute. 'And then they take away white men's jobs. Now, take for example a pipe-fitter, working in the yards. Before last year's strike he got $2.89 a day, and they'd put in a Polak as pipe-fitter's helper at $1.54 a day. It is easy t learn pipe-fitting; so pretty soon the pipe-fitter would get fired and the Polak got his place, with his wages raised to $1.89 a day. That's why we don't like the hunkies.

As for the police, a great illumination burst on me while I was talking with Inspector Dan Cady, known as 'Fighting Dan,' who was so efficient in last year's strike that he was held for the grand jury on the charge of killing a striker. Cady was tel ing me what a vicious, violent class of men these 'hunkies'

were, when he suddenly burst out: 'The whole guts of the business is, those damned foreigners came here and took away white men's jobs. My father, and the fathers of many officers on the force, used to work in the Standard Oil, years ago. It was the hunkies that was brought in to scab on them, and took their places.'

What irony! Because the Standard Oil Company starved out Americans and filled their places with ignorant immigrants just landed from Europe, the

Americans fight to uphold the Standard Oil Company when it does the same thing to the immigrants, driven to blind desperation at last. The public will remember that the Colorado Strikers were also the men who had been brought in by the mining companies to fill the places of English-speaking workers at lower wages.18

The Record Is Cleansed

By the time John Reed wrote his article, the workers were back at the refineries, having gained nothing. It was impossible for unorganized workers without savings to feed their families while on strike unless assisted by a union such as the I.W.W., but such people were not allowed on the streets in most company towns.

The great achievement for Rockefeller in all this is that the entire matter is misinterpreted by the press, swept under the rug, and never mentioned in the biographies, though the casualties in Bayonne in 10 days rival those of the more celebrated struggles. The narratives had moved on to profits, philanthropy and patriotism, leaving the dead to bury their dead.

Tom McDonough's most recent book is An Eye For Others, Dorothy Day, Journalist: 1916-1917. He is working on a book on the cartoons of Ryan Walker and blogs at [url=http://shirewwifi.com"] The Shire With Wifi[/url].

• 1. Barton, Dante, Rockefeller Sowing Wind at Bayonne, *The New York Call*, October 12, 1916.

Dante Barton was the Vice-Chairman of the Committee on Industrial Relations founded in 1915

to publicize Labor's story and explore the feasibility of founding a political party supporting labor outside of the socialist movement. This effort ended when Dante Barton died unexpectedly in August, 1917.

• 2. Wright, Chester, Bayonne Explodes, And Nobody Cares About It, Sunday Call Magazine, October 22, 1916.

• 3. Reed, John, A CITY OF VIOLENCE, The New York Tribune, October 29, 1916, page D1.

Reed’s article is accompanied by three drawings by Boardman Robinson.

• 4. Chernow, Ron, *Titan: The Life of John D. Rockefeller, Sr., New York, Knopf Doubleday, 1998, 250.*

• 5. Cfr. Flynn, John T., God’s Gold, The Story of Rockefeller and His Times, Harcourt Brace and Co., NY, 1932, Part Six, Chapter VII.

• 6. Reed.

• 7. The New York Times, October 11, 12 and 13, 1916

• 8. Editorial, October 22, 1916.

• 9. Barton, *Rockefeller Sowing Wind at Bayonne*, The New York Call, October 15, 1916, page 2.

• 10. Cfr. 8,000 QUIT STANDARD OIL PLANT IN BAYONNE, WORKERS DEMAND FOR

INCREASED WAGES REFUSED AND STRIKE IS CALLED, *The New York Call*, October 10,

1916, page 1.

• 11. Even the New York Times quoted Police Captain Edward Griffin *We’l settle this strike ourselves without anyone’s help*. Oct 17, 1916.

• 12. Reed.

• 13. Wright.

• 14. Barton, *Gunmen and Police, Not Workers, Incite Riots in Bayonne, Barton Says*, The New York Call, October 15, page 2.

• 15. Reed.

• 16. Heaton Vorse, Mary, *Bayonne Police Clever Enough to Have Shot First*, The New York Globe, October 14, 1916.

• 17. Heaton Vorse.

- 18. Reed.